
The Urdu Qur'anic Commentary of
Muhammad Shafi' (d. 1976):
Ma'arifu'l-Qur'an

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THERE EXISTS in Islam today a strong back-to-the-sources movement. Two factors propel this movement. On the one hand, there is a distrust in the efficacy of the classical structures of religious thought to meet the needs and challenges of modern life. On the other hand, there is a confidence that the fundamental sources of Islam, purged of some of their historical accretions, can enable and equip Muslims adequately to address those needs and challenges. Quite expectedly, one form that the back-to-the-sources movement takes is that of interpreting anew the Islamic scripture with the addition, in non-Arab Muslim countries, of translating the scripture into national or local languages. In Urdu, in the course of the last two hundred years, many notable works of Qur'an translation and exegesis have come into existence.¹ The *Ma'arifu'l-Qur'an* of the late grand mufti of Pakistan, Muhammad Shafi', is one such work.² It is typical of the Urdu *tafsir* tradition in some ways, but departs from it in others.

Introducing Muhammad Shafi'

Muhammad Shafi' was born in Deoband, a town in the district of Saharanpur in the province of Uttar Pradesh in India, in 1897. He was educated at the famous religious seminary of Deoband, where he later served as teacher and chief mufti for a combined period of twenty-six years.³ He took active part in the Pakistan

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movement, visiting and lecturing in various parts of India. In May 1947, he migrated to what was soon to become Pakistan. He settled in Karachi, where he founded a religious school, Daru'l-'Ulum, which also served as a *daru'l-ifta'* (office of legal advice). Like many other scholars, he tried, through lectures and writings, to influence policymakers to take constitutional and other measures to make Pakistan an Islamic state in letter and spirit. The turbulent political history of the country left him, like many others, disappointed. Giving up his struggle in the political field, he devoted his attention to educating the public. During the 1970 general elections, however, when political parties with socialist programmes became quite strong, he again became politically active; he toured many parts of the country, warning the people against the dangers of socialism and communism. This period of his political activity was brief. After a second retirement from politics, he spent the last years of his life reworking his lectures and notes on the Qur'an. He died in 1976, having authored a large number of books and booklets on a wide range of Islamic subjects.⁴

Prefatory Notes on the *Ma'arif*

In 1954, Muhammad Shafi' was invited by Radio Pakistan to give weekly *tafsir* lectures on the Qur'an. The idea was to select passages from the Qur'an which were especially relevant to the situation of Muslims in modern times and expound those passages, taking into account the issues and questions they raised. Muhammad Shafi' accepted the invitation on two conditions: that he would receive no remuneration for the talks, and that no terms he might consider inappropriate would be stipulated. The series of talks lasted until 1964, and covered selections from the first fourteen suras of the Qur'an. The continuity of the *tafsir* was, however, maintained in the serialised publication of the selected, and other, passages in the monthly *al-Balagh* of Karachi, and this publication became the groundwork of *Ma'arifu'l-Qur'an*. The actual writing of the *Ma'arif* was begun in 1968 and completed in 1972. The eight-volume *tafsir* was first published between 1969 and 1972. In the second edition, the author completely revised the first volume and made certain

changes in other volumes. The second edition includes an enlarged version of the author's introduction, and an introduction written at his behest by his son Muhammad Taqi Usmani (b. 1943);⁵ the latter introduction contains general notes on the Qur'an and a statement of the principles of Qur'anic interpretation. This chapter is based on the second edition of the work.

Ordinarily, a Muslim scholar who writes a *tafsir* in a language other than Arabic also translates the Qur'an into that language. Muhammad Shafi' provides two translations of the Qur'an, neither of them his own. To translate the Qur'an is, to Muhammad Shafi', to translate the word of God, a task that does not admit over-translation or under-translation in the slightest degree. Feeling that the task was too onerous, he decided not to translate the Qur'an himself. The first of the two translations he borrows is that by Mahmudu'l-Hasan (d. 1920), whose erudition and anti-British struggle earned him the title of *shaykhu'l-Hind* (leader of the Indian Muslim community).⁶ The translation was a revision of *Muzihu'l-Qur'an* by Shah 'Abdu'l-Qadir (d. 1813), which, despite its extraordinary merits, had become a little archaic with the passage of time.⁷ The second translation was by Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi (d. 1943), *Bayanu'l-Qur'an*.⁸ Although he had impeccable credentials as a religious scholar, Muhammad Shafi', by refusing to undertake what he considered to be a very heavy responsibility, was, in his own way, paying quiet homage to a long-standing Muslim tradition of reluctance to translate the word of God. Of the two translations given in the *Ma'arif*, the one by Mahmudu'l-Hasan is given interlinearly, that is, between the lines of the original Qur'anic Arabic. The second, that by Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi, is given (sometimes with minor modifications) immediately after the Arabic text, under the heading 'Khulasah-i tafsir' ('Exegesis in a Nutshell').⁹ The *Bayan* seeks to present the Qur'an as a connected text, and is remarkable for, among other things, the deftness with which a highly nuanced textual exegesis is incorporated in the translation. An engaged Urdu reader would draw great benefit from the book, which would have appealed to a much larger audience had its style been a little less dense and had it avoided the not infrequently occurring recondite technical discussions. Making the *Bayan* accessible to the general public was a

goal Muhammad Shafi' had long cherished and, in the *Ma'arif*, he attempts to realise that goal in two principal ways: by reproducing, in simple language, those discussions in the *Bayan* with which an average believer should have some familiarity but which are too difficult for the believer to understand owing to the *Bayan*'s technical language, and by amplifying certain other discussions in the *Bayan* whose importance the common reader cannot appreciate since they take the form of highly terse notes.

Muhammad Shafi' repeatedly downplays the element of originality in his work. To a considerable degree, it is true, the commentary in the *Ma'arif* consists of borrowings, even extensive verbatim quotations, but then it is Muhammad Shafi's avowed aim to rely on the works of those whom he considers his mentors, especially Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi, and to serve as a transmitter of the insights they have contributed to the field of Qur'anic studies. Nevertheless, there is quite a bit in the *Ma'arif* that can be called original. Accompanying the two aforementioned translations of the Qur'an in the *Ma'arif* is the commentary written by Muhammad Shafi'. This commentary is the most substantial part of the *Ma'arif* and constitutes his major contribution to Qur'anic exegesis. Like many other modern Qur'anic commentators, Muhammad Shafi' typically divides a Qur'anic sura into pericopes, each pericope focusing on a single idea or theme, or on a set of related ideas or themes. He explains the relationship between the preceding and following pericopes and then expounds, in general terms, the interconnection of verses within a given pericope. In doing so, he reinforces the modern Qur'anic exegetical trend of seeing the suras as coherent units. Next he discusses, under separate headings, any important issues the verses seem to raise. These issues are generally theological or legal in nature. At times, he explains the Qur'anic use of certain words and expressions occurring in the text, but the *Ma'arif* contains very few detailed discussions of Arabic grammar and *balagha* (rhetoric), being, in this respect, typical of modern Qur'anic exegesis.

In the introduction to the *Ma'arif*, Muhammad Shafi' observes that modern Muslim readers are, generally speaking, unable to benefit from the rich tradition of Qur'anic exegesis because of the

difficulty of the technical language of that exegesis. Of the Qur'anic commentaries already available in Urdu, very few, in his opinion, are a reliable source of religious knowledge and insight. Accordingly, he conceived the idea of writing, for the benefit of the average Urdu-speaking reader, a *tafsir* in which he would make accessible, in language that is simple and uncluttered with technical jargon, the contents of traditional exegesis. From this statement it appears that Muhammad Shafi's primary motivation for writing the *Ma'arif* was, first, to revive general interest in the classical exegesis of the Qur'an, and, second, to provide an alternative to the available exegetical material in Urdu. *Ma'ariful-Qur'an* is, thus, confessedly traditional in outlook, this outlook being reflected in the sources and authorities used by its author. Muhammad Shafi' relies heavily not only on the Prophetic Hadith, but also on reports emanating from the Prophet's Companions and from the authorities of the next two generations, commonly known as the Successors and the Successors to the Successors. In addition, he uses a large number of well-known authorities of later centuries. As a graduate of the Deoband seminary, which produces scholars of Islamic law and religion in the Hanafi tradition, Muhammad Shafi' approaches the Qur'an from the standpoint of a jurist-theologian who attempts, on the one hand, to acquaint today's lay Muslim readers with the well-established legal and theological tradition (Sunni tradition, that is) of Islam and, on the other hand, to assure those readers that Islam offers guidance on all the major issues that may arise in various spheres of human thought and activity in any age. Being a Hanafi scholar, Muhammad Shafi' frequently uses the method of *qiyas* (analogical reasoning) to explain the nature of that guidance. Thus, he establishes correspondences between historically attested precedents and present-day issues and, citing classical authorities in his support, deduces from the Qur'anic text what he considers appropriate rulings on those issues. In addition, he often explains the philosophy behind the Qur'anic injunctions, assuring the believing reader that all those injunctions contain profound wisdom; he then tries to present this wisdom with a view to strengthening the reader's faith in God and in Islam. As a theologian, he anticipates possible questions about, or objections to, this or that verse or idea

in the Qur'an and then responds to those questions or objections, again seeking to vindicate the integrity and invulnerability of the Divine writ. Thus, the *Ma'arif* is a veritable compendium of the traditional Muslim scholarship on the Qur'an, one from which a devoted Urdu-reading student of the Qur'an can draw great benefit. In this respect, the work invites comparison with a similar compendious *tafsir*, namely, *al-Jami' li-ahkam al-Qur'an* of Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Qurtubi (d. 1272), which, in fact, is one of the main sources used by Muhammad Shafi'.

Although its basic *élan* is traditionalist, the *Ma'arif* is, in some ways, a modern *tafsir*. In the introduction, Muhammad Shafi' remarks that earlier Qur'an commentators took especial care to address issues which had arisen in their times, and dealt with the doubts and objections that were raised about Islam. He, too, would not be content simply to reproduce, if in simplified language, the views of earlier authorities, but would also address issues that Muslims face in the modern age. In the following section, we will illustrate Muhammad Shafi's reader-oriented (or, perhaps, believer-oriented) approach by offering, in translation, a selection of passages from the *Ma'arif*. Some of the passages will deal with issues that have arisen specifically in the Indian subcontinent.

Passages from the *Ma'arif*

On theology

The inimitability of the Qur'an

The inimitability (*i'jaz*) of the Qur'an is one of the celebrated issues in classical *tafsir*, and Muhammad Shafi' deals with it at length at Q. 2:23-4 (*And if you are in doubt concerning that We have sent down on Our servant, then bring a sura like it, and call your witnesses, apart from God, if you are truthful. And if you do not – and you will not – then fear the Fire, whose fuel is men and stones, prepared for unbelievers*).¹⁰ He offers no fewer than ten reasons to prove that nothing like the Qur'an has ever been produced or will ever be produced. In the course of this discussion, he cites several sources on the subject. One of these sources is a book by Ashraf 'Ali

Thanawi, from which Muhammad Shafi' quotes the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and a few European writers to show that even non-Muslims have testified to the remarkable truths contained in the Qur'an. Of course, Muhammad Shafi' does not explain why such European writers did not choose to accept Islam, but the passages he quotes are certainly aimed at modern Muslim readers, who are expected to be impressed by Western accounts of the veracity of Islam and the Qur'an. Notable in this connection is Muhammad Shafi's reply to the objection raised today by some people against the Qur'anic claim of inimitability. While the reply is not entirely original, one can clearly see the need felt by Muhammad Shafi' to satisfy modern readers by attempting to address them in terms familiar to them:

Today, some objectors say that the inability to produce the like of a discourse cannot be adduced as proof that such discourse is the speech of God or is a miracle, for it is possible for a competent rhetorician to write prose or poetry the like of which cannot be produced by others. Sa'di's *Gulistan* and Fayzi's *tafsir*, in which only un-pointed characters are used, are often cited as matchless and inimitable books. Are they, then, to be regarded as miraculous as well?

A little reflection will, however, show these people that Sa'di and Fayzi possessed abundant resources for purposes of study and writing, acquired their education over long periods of time, spent years at school, stayed awake for nights, worked hard for extended periods of time, and sat at the feet of great and distinguished scholars. If, after years and years of hard work and brain-stretching exercises, say, Fayzi, Hariri, Mutanabbi, or someone else in Arabic, Sa'di in Persian, Milton in English, Homer in Greek, or Kalidasa in Sanskrit happens to have a composition that excels that of others, then this is no cause for wonder. A miracle, by definition, is something that occurs without the intermediacy of familiar causes. Are these individuals' systematic acquisition of knowledge, their long-standing association with their teachers, their extensive study, their practice of their art over long periods of time not

all-too-evident causes of their erudition? If their compositions have excelled those of others, then what is the wonder? The thing to wonder about is that a man who never touched pen or book and never set foot in any school or seminary should present before the world such a book that thousands of Sa'dis and Fayzis should consider it an honour to sacrifice their all for it, and should attribute all their knowledge and wisdom to the instruction by such a man – namely, the Prophet. Furthermore, why would anyone need to adduce in evidence the compositions of Sa'di and Fayzi? Did these individuals claim to be prophets, did they call their compositions – matchless and inimitable as they were – miraculous, challenging the world to produce compositions like theirs, so that people should feel constrained to attempt to match their compositions and come up with something like them?

Again, it is not simply the eloquence and the organisation of the material of the Qur'an that are matchless; the wonderful ways in which the Qur'an has influenced hearts and minds are even more unique and astonishing, leading to a change in the temperament and disposition of nations, to a radical transformation in human character, and to the fierce, rude and uncouth Arabs coming to be recognised as teachers of ethics, knowledge and wisdom. This astonishing, revolutionary influence has been acknowledged not only by Muslims but also by hundreds of non-Muslims in the present age. Compiling the statements of European orientalists on this subject would result in a whole book by itself.¹¹

The finality of prophethood

The belief in the finality of Muhammad's prophethood, derived from Q. 33:40 (*Muhammad is not the father of any one of your men, but the Messenger of God, and the Seal of the Prophets; God has knowledge of everything*) and numerous sayings of the Prophet, is fundamental to Islam. Always an important part of Islamic theology, the belief assumed new importance in India at the end of the nineteenth century, when Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908) of Qadiyan claimed to be a prophet and also the Messiah whose

return had been foretold in the Hadith. This claim led the country's Muslim scholars to defend vigorously the tenet of the finality of prophethood. The Urdu *tafsirs* written in the twentieth century, therefore, make a special effort to highlight the tenet, seeking to refute Ghulam Ahmad's prophetic and messianic claims. In a booklet entitled *Khatm-i nubuwwat (Finality of Muhammad's Prophethood)*,¹² Muhammad Shafi' offered a detailed rebuttal of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's claims. At Q. 33:40, he reproduces some of the arguments from the booklet, and one of them is presented in the following passage:

This pretender to prophecy [Mirza Ghulam Ahmad] played a novel trick in order to pave the way for his claim to prophecy: he invented a new type of prophecy that is totally unattested in the Qur'an and the Sunna, and then said that this type does not contravene the Qur'anic injunction about the finality of prophethood. The gist of the matter is that, in interpreting prophecy, he adopted a path well-known among Hindus and other nations, namely, that a person can, in another lifecycle, reappear in the form of another person, and then said that if a man becomes like the Prophet Muhammad on account of his perfect emulation of the Prophet, then his arrival is, as it were, the arrival of the Prophet himself, for he is the *zill* [shadow] and *buruz* [manifestation], and, accordingly, his claim does not affect the doctrine of the finality of prophethood.¹³

Citing a number of hadiths and several statements of well-known religious authorities to refute Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's claim, Muhammad Shafi' declares that there is 'absolutely no basis in Islam' for the *zilli* or *buruzi* type of prophecy mentioned by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad.¹⁴

The intermediation of prophets and saints

The issue of invoking prophets and saints for help, while by no means peculiar to the Indian Muslim context, has, nevertheless, been significant in that context. The Barelwi school of thought in India encouraged belief in such intermediation, whereas the Deobandi school of thought vigorously refuted the belief.

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Muhammad Shafi‘, a prominent Deobandi, discusses the issue in many places in his *tafsir*. For example, interpreting the words *ihyaka nasta‘in* as ‘We seek help from You [God] alone’ in Q. 1:5 (*Thee only we serve; to Thee alone we pray for succour*), Muhammad Shafi‘ stresses that the crucial point is to regard God as the ultimate source of all power. Requesting a prophet or a saint to pray to God for oneself or someone else, or petitioning God in the name of a prophet or a saint, is, therefore, permitted in the Qur’an and the Hadith on condition that the concept of God as the absolute possessor of all power remains uncompromised. After providing this explanation of the matter, he sums up his view in the following words:

People often have difficulty in understanding the issues of *wasila* [intermediation], *isti‘ana* [call for help] and *istimdad* [petition for support]. It is hoped that this explanation will elucidate the truth about the matter and will also show that taking prophets and saints as intermediaries is neither permissible in an absolute sense nor forbidden in an absolute sense; and that one should keep in mind the above-made distinction, namely, that it is an idolatrous – and therefore forbidden – act to take someone as an intermediary believing that he is the possessor of absolute power, but it is permissible to take someone as an intermediary when one regards him only as a means or as an instrument.¹⁵

On politics, law and society

The basis of Muslim nationalism

We noted above Muhammad Shafi‘’s active participation in the Indian Muslims’ movement for the creation of Pakistan. His involvement in the movement leads him to explain the Qur’anic verses with political content in terms that, on the one hand, remind one of the political discourse shaped by the Pakistan movement in the Muslim India of the 1940s, but, on the other hand, seek to furnish present-day Muslims with principles to help them to distinguish an Islamic from a Western political system. Like several other modern Qur’anic exegetes, Muhammad Shafi‘ attempts to

bring out the political potential of the word *khalifa* in Q. 2:30 (*And when thy Lord said to the angels, 'I am setting in the earth a viceroy.' They said, 'What, wilt Thou set therein one who will do corruption there, and shed blood, while We proclaim Thy praise and call Thee Holy?' He said, 'Assuredly I know that you know not.'*), making, among others, the following comments:

In the democracies of the world, generally, the legislative assemblies and their members enjoy absolute freedom and authority; they can enact, on the basis of their view or opinion, whatever law, good or bad, they desire. An Islamic legislature and its members and elected *amir* are, however, subject to the principles and laws they have received from God through the Prophet Muhammad. Furthermore, there are certain conditions attached to membership of such a legislature or consultative body, and the individual elected *amir* by the legislature is also subject to certain limits. Still further, the legislatures can legislate only within the limits of the principles laid down by the Qur'an and the Sunna, and they may not legislate in contravention of these sources.¹⁶

An Islamic methodology of societal reform

According to Q. 2:219 (*They will question thee concerning wine, and arrow-shuffling. Say: 'In both is heinous sin; and uses for men, but the sin in them is more heinous than the usefulness.' They will question thee concerning what they should expend. Say: 'The abundance.' So God makes clear His signs to you; haply you will reflect*), the harm resulting from drinking and gambling outweighs any benefit that might accrue from these activities. After comparing the Qur'an's successful prohibition of drinking in seventh-century Arabia with the abortive American Prohibition of the 1920s, Muhammad Shafi' comments as follows:

A little reflection will show that the Islamic sharia never regarded the law alone as adequate for purposes of reforming society. On the contrary, before laying down the law, it trained the people's minds and, by using elixir-like recipes of worship, piety and consideration of the afterlife, brought about a major revolution in their outlook and temperament, producing individuals who were

prepared to sacrifice their life, wealth and prestige at the Prophet's call. This task of formation of individuals of such character through discipline and training continued during the entire Meccan period. When a group of such devotees had come into existence, the law was put into force. The Americans, too, pulled no punches in employing their unmatched resources in preparing minds, but they considered everything except the afterlife, whereas thought of the afterlife informed the entire beings of the Muslims.¹⁷

Islamic principles of egalitarianism and moderation

In Pakistan during the 1960s and 1970s the socialist movement gained much ground, and political parties with socialist programmes became quite powerful. The perceived association of socialism – and especially communism – with atheism was very alarming to the country's ulama, many of whom criticised the two ideologies as godless and antithetical to Islam. Muhammad Shafi' was among those ulama who subjected socialism and communism to critique on economic grounds. Since the critics of socialism and communism could be accused of lending direct or indirect support to ruthless capitalism, Muhammad Shafi' and other scholars took care to offer a critique of capitalism as well. In doing so, they tried to bring out the distinctive features of the Islamic economic system. Q. 2:199 (*Then press on from where the people press on, and pray for God's forgiveness; God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate*) instructs the elitist Quraysh to perform a certain hajj ritual in unison with ordinary pilgrims, and denies them any privileges in this regard. After explaining the verse, Muhammad Shafi' draws the following lesson from it:

This Qur'anic injunction yields an important principle of social life, namely, that, in lifestyle and habitation, those of a higher status should not set themselves apart from those of a lower status, but should live in harmony with them, for this will create a sense of brotherhood, sympathy and love among them, overcome the division between the rich and the poor, and put an end to the conflict between the labourer and the capitalist.¹⁸

Whose Islam?

A commonly made criticism of Muslim religious scholars – of scholars of the law, especially – is that there are too many differences among them; that the ‘believer-in-the-street’ does not know to whom to turn for guidance. So, whose interpretation of Islam is to be accepted? To Muhammad Shafi‘, this is a frivolous objection. Invoking the principle of the mutual orthodoxy of the (Sunni) Muslim legal schools, he compares the scholars’ disagreement to the several lanes of a road designated for different types of traffic, all lanes taking the travellers to the same destination. The disagreement on a given issue serves, through discussion and debate, to elucidate and illustrate the various aspects of an issue.¹⁹ Like physicians and lawyers, who differ on medical and legal issues, Muslim scholars have their differences, but such differences, when they proceed from well-established principles and represent genuine belief and commitment, are fruitful and are only to be welcomed.²⁰ In this connection, Muhammad Shafi‘ cites and explains the well-known Prophetic hadith according to which the difference of opinion among Muslims is a blessing from God.²¹

On science and medicine

Discussing the word ‘*alamin*’ (‘Being’) in Q. 1:2 (*Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being*), Muhammad Shafi‘ cites an article by the astronaut John Glenn in somewhat indirect support of the view of early Muslim authorities, like Muqatil and Razi, that thousands of ‘worlds’ other than the one known to us may exist.²² Q. 2:22 (*who assigned to you the earth for a [firash]*) says that God has made the earth a *firash* (i.e. a flat surface). To the objection that the Qur’anic description of the earth appears to conflict with the scientifically established truth that the earth is round, Muhammad Shafi‘ responds in these words:

The word *firash* does not necessarily imply that the earth is not round, for this huge globe called earth appears to the eye to be a flat surface even though it is round, and the general style of presentation of the Qur’an is that it describes a thing in terms

that would be easily comprehensible to a scholar and an illiterate person, to a city dweller and a rustic.²³

Muhammad Shafi' addresses several issues that have arisen in the modern practice of medicine. Q. 2:173 (*These things only has He forbidden you: carrion, blood, the flesh of swine, what has been hollowed to other than God. Yet who so is constrained, not desiring nor transgressing, no sin shall be on him; God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate*) forbids the use of certain meats and of blood as food. In explaining the prohibition of blood, Muhammad Shafi' discusses several derivative issues, among them that of blood transfusion. He begins by stating a principle:

Just as ingestion of blood is forbidden, so its external use is forbidden. And just as it is forbidden to buy or sell all unclean things and to derive benefit from them, so it is forbidden to buy or sell blood – and the money earned from such trade is forbidden, too – since the words of the Qur'an forbid blood in an absolute sense, the proscription covering all forms of use of blood.²⁴

He goes on to discuss blood transfusion:

The correct and well-considered view of the matter is that human blood is part of the human being. When blood is taken out of the human body, it becomes impure. It would follow, in principle, that to transfuse one person's blood into another person's body ought to be forbidden for two reasons: first, because human organs must be treated with respect, and blood transfusion detracts from that respect; second, because blood is a major impurity and use of impure things is forbidden. But reflection on the dispensations made by the Islamic sharia in cases of emergency and in common medical treatment leads to the following conclusions: in the first place, although blood is part of a human being, its transfusion into another human body does not require the cutting up of human organs or a surgical operation; rather, blood is drawn by means of a syringe and is injected into the other human body. It is, therefore, analogous to milk, which comes out of one human body without any cutting or slicing of the body and becomes part of another human being, and it is

in view of the child's need for milk that the Islamic sharia has called human milk the child's food, obligating the mother to suckle her children so long as she remains married to the children's father.²⁵

The *Ma'arif* and its Place in the Tradition of Urdu Qur'anic Exegesis

A brief comparison of the *Ma'arif* with a few other Urdu Qur'anic commentaries will help to identify some of its features more sharply and place it, broadly, in the tradition of Urdu Qur'anic exegesis. It would be practical to compare the *Ma'arif* with the Qur'anic commentaries listed at the beginning of this chapter.²⁶

Shah 'Abdu'l-Qadir's *Muḍīhu'l-Qur'an*, with its unadorned and simple, yet idiomatic, language and its brief but to-the-point explanatory remarks, is addressed to readers with an elementary background in Islam, and may be regarded as a basic course in Qur'anic literacy. The *Ma'arif*, though also addressed to the common reader, assumes, on that reader's part, a higher level of intellectual preparation and a deeper level of interest in Qur'anic studies. Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), in his *Tafsīru'l-Qur'an*, as in his other writings, tried to show the consonance between the teachings of the book of God, the Qur'an, and the insights derived from the study of the handiwork of God, nature. Influenced by the scientific notions of the nineteenth century, Sayyid Ahmad Khan presented what amounted to a naturalistic interpretation of the Qur'an, for which he was severely criticised by mainstream Muslim scholars, both inside and outside India. The author of the *Ma'arif*, while concerned with demonstrating that Islam and science, or revelation and reason, are not in conflict with each other, has no interest in offering a naturalistic interpretation of the Qur'an and, unlike Sayyid Ahmad Khan, makes no attempt to put a 'scientific' construction on such things as miracles. 'Abdu'l-Haqq Haqqani's (d. 1917) *Tafsīr-i Haqqani* makes detailed, but usually polemical, comparisons of the Qur'an with Jewish, Christian and Hindu scriptures, his particular focus being defence of Islam and the Qur'an against attacks by Christian missionaries and Hindu writers. The *Ma'arif* defends the Qur'anic viewpoint on

interreligious issues raised in the Islamic scripture, but it does not go out of the way to do so. The influence of Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's *Bayan* on Muhammad Shafi's *Ma'arif* has already been noted. It may be added here that, unlike the *Bayan*, the *Ma'arif* tries to address the typical modern issues faced by people in the social, economic and political spheres of life. This feature of the *Ma'arif* represents its author's concern to demonstrate, both to the people and to the ruling classes of Pakistan, that the Qur'an is capable of serving as a source of guidance in the present age no less than it was in earlier times – a concern that is noticeable in other writings of Muhammad Shafi' as well. Furthermore, unlike the *Bayan*, the *Ma'arif* avoids discussion of technical matters in philology and other areas that would be beyond an average reader's capacity. The *Tarjumanu'l-Qur'an* of Abu'l-Kalam Azad (d. 1958), written in an elegant literary style, contains a detailed commentary on the opening sura of the Qur'an, followed by brief notes on the other suras. In a sense, the commentary on the opening sura is the most significant part of the *Tarjuman*, for it offers, with reference to some of the fundamental concepts of the Qur'an – such as divine providence, divine mercy and divine justice – a fairly exhaustive treatment of the Islamic philosophy of religion. A notable feature of Azad's commentary on this sura is his comparison of Islam with a variety of other religious and philosophical traditions, which leads him to conclude that all religions seek the same truth and are, in principle, valid. Muhammad Shafi', while he occasionally deals with aspects of the Islamic philosophy of religion, nowhere makes a systematic attempt to discuss such philosophy and has no great interest in comparing Islam with other religions, with the exception of Judaism and Christianity, not to speak of advocating the essential validity of all religions. 'Abdul Majid Daryabadi's (d. 1977) and Muhammad Shafi's *tafsir* works are alike in their avowed reliance on Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's *Bayan*. Like Muhammad Shafi', Daryabadi frequently cites and defers to the exegetical views and opinions of Thanawi, whom he calls his *murshid* (mentor, spiritual guide). Both draw heavily on the classical exegetical tradition, but Daryabadi does so by frequently quoting short, pithy statements from Arabic primary sources, giving his readers an idea of the range of classical *tafsir*, whereas Muhammad

Shafi' offers a more discursive treatment of issues in classical *tafsir*. Both attempt to reach a large, educated modern audience, though the *tafsir* of each would seem to have greater appeal for certain types of readers – Daryabadi's, for readers with a background in Western-style education, and Muhammad Shafi's, for readers with a background in traditional education. Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi (d. 1979), in his *Tafhimu'l-Qur'an*, presents Islam as a systematic code of life governing not only the doctrinal and ethical but also the political, social and economic aspects of human life. Muhammad Shafi' does treat individual political, social and economic issues during his explication of the Qur'anic text, but he does not highlight the systemic nature of Qur'anic thought with the rigour and persistence that we find in Mawdudi's *tafsir*. The distinctive feature of Amin Ahsan Islahi's (d. 1997) *tafsir* is its operating assumption that the Qur'an is possessed of a hermeneutically significant *nazm*, or coherence, and that the verses in the individual suras of the Qur'an, as also the suras themselves, are interconnected in a fairly systematic way. Moreover, in interpreting the Qur'anic text, Islahi relies on the traditions (*riwayat*) only to a limited extent. Muhammad Shafi's *Ma'arif*, following Thanawi's *Bayan*, does frequently comment on the interconnectedness of verses within a given sura and of suras themselves, but the interconnection thus established does not arise from a carefully worked out set of theoretical principles, and, as such, is not marked by patterns discernible in Islahi's *tafsir*. On the other hand, the *Ma'arif* relies heavily on the *riwayat* in explicating the Qur'an.

Concluding Remarks

The *Ma'arif* is a sincere attempt, made by a distinguished Muslim scholar of the traditional mould, to present, in a form accessible to the average educated reader, the essence of classical Qur'anic exegesis in Urdu. At the same time, it tries to come to grips with some aspects of modernity. While he presents, explains and defends, for example, classical Islamic law in his commentary on the legislative verses of the Qur'an, Muhammad Shafi' also takes pains to convince the modern reader that the Qur'anic injunctions

have relevance for modern times, and that they are not a set of draconian laws meant to be enforced without regard to the actual conditions existing in society, but are, rather, part of a judicious scheme to reform society. Muhammad Shafi' is cognizant of the fact that many of the social and other issues facing Muslims in today's world arose under the impact of Western thought, lifestyle and culture. It is obvious, however, that he has not made a direct or in-depth study of Western culture or civilisation, and that he relies on secondary and popular sources for information about the subject. The *Ma'arif* can be seen as an attempt to reassert, among Muslims, the authority of tradition. Muhammad Shafi' had a very large following in his lifetime, and his status as a religious scholar remains undiminished in the Indian subcontinent. As an Urdu compendium of Qur'anic scholarship, the *Ma'arif* is assured a long life of publication in the subcontinent.

We noted earlier that the *Ma'arif* was self-consciously written by Muhammad Shafi' ('compiled', he himself would probably say) as a sort of addendum and a sequel to Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's *Bayan*. This seems to be the best way to describe the *Ma'arif*, as long as it is remembered that this 'addendum' or 'supplement' is a multi-volume work with several important features that demand recognition and deserve credit in their own right. It would not be wrong to say that the *Ma'arif* is indeed a necessary complement to the *Bayan*.

NOTES

- 1 Only a few of them can be listed here. Shah 'Abdu'l-Qadir Dihlawi (d. 1813), one of the sons of Shah Wali Allah Dihlawi (d. 1762), a great Indian Muslim scholar-reformer, translated the Qur'an in a language simultaneously literal and idiomatic, providing brief explanatory notes, under the title *Muḍīhu'l-Qur'an* (*Elucidator of the Qur'an*). First published in Delhi in 1829, this highly respected work has been reprinted countless times, its contents included, in whole or in part, by later writers in their works. Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), social reformer and educationist, tried to demonstrate in his *Tafsīru'l-Qur'an* (*Commentary on the Qur'an*; 7 vols. [Lahore, 1882]) the compatibility of the Qur'an with science and modern thought. *Fathu'l-Mannan* (*Revelations from the Great Benefactor*), better known as *Tafsīr-i Haqqani* (*The Qur'anic Commentary of Haqqani*) after its author, 'Abdu'l-Haqq Haqqani (d. 1917), and first published in Lahore, 1887–1900, maintains, on the basis of a comparative study of scriptures, that Islamic teachings are superior to those of

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other religions. Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi (d. 1943), one of the most prominent scholars of the Indian subcontinent, and known as 'Hakimu'l-Ummat' (Sage of the Muslim Community), wrote *Bayanu'l-Qur'an*, a compendious two-volume commentary, including a translation of the Qur'an, that was first published in Karachi in 1908, with several revisions and enlargements following in later years. In a separate exegetical section, the interlinear translation is repeated but includes, deftly and seamlessly, explanatory notes in parentheses, with additional exegetical comments following. Technical philological, theological and other issues are raised and discussed in Arabic, in a yet separate section. Abu'l-Kalam Azad (d. 1958), Indian scholar and politician, authored *Tarjumanu'l-Qur'an* (*Interpreter of the Qur'an*; 1st edn, 2 vols. [Lahore, 1931]; expanded edn, 4 vols. [Delhi, 1980]), aiming to convey the pristine sense of the Arabic original in highly idiomatic Urdu, the translation containing parenthetical explanations, with discussion of selected issues following. 'Abdul Majid Daryabadi (d. 1977), in his *al-Qur'anu'l-hakim ma'a tarjama wa-tafsir* (*The Wise Qur'an, with Translation and Commentary*; first published in four volumes in Karachi in 1952), a compendious work including both translation and commentary, employs standard modern Urdu to reach a large, educated Muslim readership in the Indian subcontinent. Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi (d. 1979), in his *Tafhimu'l-Qur'an* (*Understanding the Qur'an*; 6 vols. [Lahore, 1949–72]), deliberately avoids translating the Qur'an literally, choosing, instead, the mode of 'interpretive rendering', with a view to conveying to an Urdu-reading public some of the beauty and eloquence that the original addressees of the Qur'an must have felt upon hearing the Arabic Qur'an. Amin Ahsan Islahi (d. 1997), author of *Tadabbur-i Qur'an* (*Reflections on the Qur'an*; [Lahore, 1967–80]), following the principles of Qur'anic interpretation enunciated by his teacher, Hamid al-Din al-Farahi (d. 1930), underscores the central importance of studying the Qur'an as a book possessed of unity or coherence.

- 2 Muhammad Shafi', *Ma'arifu'l-Qur'an*, 2nd edn, 8 vols. (Karachi, 1990). There is an English translation, made by several hands and revised by Muhammad Taqi Usmani, Muhammad Shafi's son (*Ma'arifu'l-Qur'an*, 8 vols. [Karachi, 2005]); the translation is also available on several websites. In this chapter the author has provided his own translation of the material cited from the original Urdu *Ma'arif*.
- 3 See the autobiographical part of the introduction to the *Ma'arif*, vol. I, pp. 60–68. Much of the information presented in this chapter about Muhammad Shafi's life is taken from this autobiographical section. For a study of the Deoband seminary, see Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ, 1982).
- 4 Besides addressing major issues in Islamic theology and jurisprudence, the works of Muhammad Shafi' deal with questions raised by economic systems like capitalism and socialism, and by certain developments in scientific and medical fields. They also deal with matters that have historically been controversial among Muslims. The titles of some of his works are: *Sirat-i khatamu'l-anbiya'* (*Life of the Final Prophet* [Karachi, 1962]), a biography of Muhammad; *Jawahiru'l-fiqh* (*Jewels of Jurisprudence* [Karachi, 1975]), a large collection of essays on a variety of topics in Islamic law; *Islam ka nizam-i arazi* (*The Islamic System of Land Tenure* [Karachi, 1979]); *Islam ka nizam-i taqsim-i*

dawlat (The Islamic System of Distribution of Wealth [Karachi, 1962]); *A'za'-i insani ki paywand-kari* (Human Organ Transplantation [Karachi, 1967]); and *Islam awr musiqi* (Islam and Music [Karachi, 1982]).

- 5 A graduate of Daru'l-'Ulum, Karachi, and a holder of university degrees, Muhammad Taqi Usmani is an eminent scholar in his own right and a prolific author. He has held many important positions in Pakistan, including those of judge of the Federal Shari'at Court of Pakistan and member of the Council of Islamic Ideology. He serves on the governing boards of many religious or religiously oriented organisations in Pakistan and abroad, and is a consultant to many Pakistani and international institutions interested in determining the Islamic position on issues of banking, investment and finance.
- 6 Mahmudul-Hasan, one of the most distinguished scholars produced by Deoband (he also served as principal of Deoband), is known for his role in planning an abortive armed insurrection against the British rulers of India in 1916.
- 7 The translation is often printed along with the *tafsir* of Shabbir Ahmad Usmani: *Tafsir-i Usmani* (The Qur'anic Commentary of [Shabbir Ahmad] Usmani [n.p., n.d.]). On Shah 'Abdu'l-Qadir, see n. 1 above.
- 8 Another Deobandi luminary, Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi is said to have authored more than eight hundred works in Urdu, Persian and Arabic, his Qur'anic commentary, *Bayanu'l-Qur'an* (see n. 1, above), being one of the best known. It was on Thanawi's advice that Muhammad Shafi' dedicated himself to the cause of the Pakistan movement, which led to the creation of Pakistan in 1947.
- 9 The only change Muhammad Shafi' makes in reproducing the 'Khulasah-i tafsir' from *Bayanu'l-Qur'an* consists in the replacement of difficult and technical words in the latter with simpler ones.
- 10 English translations of the Qur'an in this chapter have been taken from Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford, 2008).
- 11 Muhammad Shafi', *Ma'arif*, vol. I, pp. 161–2.
- 12 This was published in 1998.
- 13 Muhammad Shafi', *Ma'arif*, vol. VII, p. 165.
- 14 Ibid., vol. VII, p. 168.
- 15 Ibid., vol. I, p. 102.
- 16 Ibid., vol. I, p. 186.
- 17 Ibid., vol. I, p. 527.
- 18 Ibid., vol. I, p. 489.
- 19 Ibid., vol. III, pp. 364–5.
- 20 Ibid., vol. III, p. 365.
- 21 Ibid., vol. III, p. 364.
- 22 Ibid., vol. I, pp. 81–2.
- 23 Ibid., vol. I, p. 134.
- 24 Ibid., vol. I, p. 419.
- 25 Ibid., vol. I, pp. 419–20.
- 26 See n. 1 above.

Appendix: Selected Works by Muhammad Shafi'

Islam ka nizam-i taqsim-i dawlat. Karachi, 1962.

Sirat-i khatamu'l-anbiya'. Karachi, 1962.

A'za'-i insani ki paywand-kari. Karachi, 1967.

Jawahiru'l-fiqh. Karachi, 1975.

Islam ka nizam-i arazi. Karachi, 1979.

Islam awr musiqi. Karachi, 1982.

Khatm-i nubuwwat. Karachi, 1998.

Ma'arifu'l-Qur'an, 2nd edn, 8 vols. Karachi, 1990; English translation by various translators and further revised by Muhammad Taqi Usmani, 8 vols. Karachi, 2005.

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